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**Growing online community: Core conditions to support
successful development of community in
Internet-mediated communities of practice.**

A thesis submitted in fulfillment of the
requirements for the award of the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

BRONWYN E. STUCKEY

MEd (IT)

**FACULTY OF EDUCATION
2007**

UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

Declaration

I, Bronwyn Evelyn Stuckey, certify that the material within this thesis, submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy, in the Faculty of Education University of Wollongong is wholly my own original work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. This thesis has not been submitted for the award of qualifications at any other institution.

Bronwyn E. Stuckey
August 6th 2007

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Bronwyn E. Stuckey
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Abstract

Today many groups seek to foster communities of practice in order to serve the needs of professional development, change management, quality or other professional goals. While educational agendas may be served by all communities of practice, it is not just in education that we see communities of practice (CoPs). Many long established communities can be found in sectors such as the military, government, healthcare, non profit and information technology domains.

For the most part communities of practice are considered emergent entities that are often neither planned for nor orchestrated. Yet today organizations, having seen the knowledge sharing potential of CoPs, are working to purposely instigate them. Questions remain as to how an entity such as a CoP, widely recognized as organic, can be planned or designed.

Many such organizations, grappling with community development, are also dealing with connecting highly distributed groups of people, not already connected by an existing shared technological infrastructure such as an intranet. With Internet technology so readily part of the work and home life, much of this recent community development also entails cultivating aspects of that community over the World Wide Web.

This research set out to explore the conditions that contributed to successful community development in Internet-mediated communities of practice (IMCoPs) and how the managers or conveners of such communities might contribute to these conditions when intentionally cultivating community. A further goal was to determine whether conditions vary between IMCoPs in education and other sectors. In other words, if there were idiosyncrasies in education sector communities that should be taken into account when intentionally developing educational IMCoPs.

The research was instigated by an unsuccessful attempt to foster teacher professional development by creating community in an online community space. The strengths of developing a web site to bring teachers together to engage and exchange ideas may have been understood at the outset of that task. But in hindsight, little was known about how to support this engagement and indeed the social dynamics required to sustain community over online communication.

A return to the literature describing effective teacher professional development in the contemporary educational climate led to the notion of communities of practice. While understanding CoPs and their dynamics is vital, knowing how to cultivate them, for highly distributed groups of people, over Internet technologies is an essential extension for IMCoPs. To date there is sufficient literature to support the notion that community can be developed online and there is a growing body of research that suggests how to develop face-to-face CoPs. Both bodies of literature are relevant to the development of IMCoPs but neither specifically focuses on the intentional development of IMCoPs. Filling that gap became the goal of this research. This researcher chose not to focus on all aspects of the CoP rather on what is arguably the most difficult part of the IMCoP to develop online, and the nub of the earlier failure - community.

There are examples of intentionally implemented IMCoPs that have been active for a number of years. Studying these would shed light on what it took to develop community in the past and whether there was a set of conditions, which when cultivated, might positively support community building.

A multiple-case case study method was employed to reveal the conditions present within the early years of development of 12 successful Internet-mediated communities of practice. Data was collected from multiple sources for 12 communities and four were selected to be the heuristic communities. These communities were studied in detail in order to produce a working hypothesis or heuristic set of conditions. The cases were analyzed individually and cross-case to determine the shared conditions and their priority. The resultant set of conditions and issues was reviewed for plausibility against data collected for the remaining eight communities.

The research found that there were common conditions in successful IMCoPs and presents a set of 24 categorized and prioritized conditions demonstrating various issues related to instantiations of each and the role of management in their development.

The findings of this research could be used to guide redevelopment efforts for the original community and offer advice to others working to intentionally develop IMCoPs. The components do not represent a prescription for community development nor are they as the data proved uniformly relevant for IMCoPs in all sectors and circumstances. They are conditions and issues to be considered, cultivated variously and reviewed over the life of the community.